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The Place and Limits of Wisdom Revisited

Although it might be unfair to cast the Law and the Prophets, by implication, in the role of the ugly sisters, it would be hard to deny that wisdom literature was for a long time the Cinderella of biblical studies. In his 1697 epilogue to the story of that unhappy girl, Charles Perrault drew the pragmatic moral that: ‘It’s no doubt a very good thing, to have spirit, courage, breeding, good sense, and other such qualities, of which one receives a share from heaven. Although you may be beautiful for having them, however, they will be useless for your advancement if you don’t have godfathers or godmothers to assert them.’¹ And so it was, indeed, for wisdom literature, which, lacking any fairy godparent to get it to the ball, mostly languished in the kitchen for decades during the mid to late twentieth century, despite its many acknowledged virtues. In a period that focused so much upon the big theological themes of salvation history and covenant, its ideas were marginalized both by the recognition that it showed little interest in those themes, and by the belief that the wisdom books expressed foreign ideas that were barely compatible with them, if at all.²

It is against this general background that we must view Walther Zimmerli’s famous essay on the ‘place and limits’ of wisdom, which is now celebrating fifty years since its original, 1963 publication (Zimmerli 1963). An English translation followed a year later in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (Zimmerli 1964): this is not always very close to the German, is sometimes rather cryptic, and has to be used with caution, but it surely helped to bring

¹ C’est sans doute un grand avantage

D’avoir de l’esprit, du courage,

De la naissance, du bon sens,

Et d’autres semblables talens

Qu’on reçoit du Ciel en partage;

Mais vous aurez beau les avoir,

Pour vostre avancement ce seront choses vaines

Si vous n’avez, pour les faire valoir,

Ou des parrains, ou des marraines.

The story was originally published in Perrault 1698.

² These ideas find their clearest expression in the work of Horst Dietrich Preuß, published a few years after the article by Walther Zimmerli on which I shall be focusing here: see especially Preuß 1970; 1974: 171–77.

Zimmerli's opinions to a wider audience, as did the reprint of this version in James Crenshaw's 1976 collection of important essays on wisdom (Crenshaw 1976: 314–26). Subsequently, this study has been cited very widely, because although it was by no means an attempt to overturn existing paradigms, it did try to make of them something more positive, and although its actual conclusion picks up virtually nothing of importance said previously in the essay, we can find, earlier in the discussion, a genuine, if rather back-handed attempt to recover wisdom for the mainstream. This was not something that even the high priest of salvation history, Gerhard von Rad, had attempted seriously in his influential *Theology of the Old Testament*, published a few years before, (von Rad 1957-60; 1962-65), and when von Rad subsequently turned his attention more specifically to wisdom literature, his approach was essentially to portray wisdom as a quite separate tradition (von Rad 1970; 1972). There are some important lessons still to be learned both from what Zimmerli gets right and, I think, from what he gets wrong, so I want to begin by summarizing very briefly the argument that he advances, and then using that argument as a basis to explore, from the perspective of more recent scholarship, the principal problem that he is trying to address.

Zimmerli starts with what is, in effect, a summary of the salvation-historical position, emphasizing that the theological pronouncements of Old Testament faith arise from a fundamental historical encounter between God and Israel, which underpins both of the central sections of the canon, the Law and the Prophets. Wisdom's lack of any connection to this divine history with Israel is itself simply 'astonishing', according to the English version, but made 'all the more surprising' in the original, specifically by the fact that the account in 1 Kgs 3 of Solomon's endowment with wisdom by God offered an opportunity for such a link, which is spurned by both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (Zimmerli 1963:122; 1964:147). That rejection demonstrates the very different 'structure' of a literature that speaks freely about people and kings, but not about YHWH's chosen people, their anointed king, or the Davidic dynasty with its own special promise. For Zimmerli, therefore, wisdom literature does not simply stand outside the salvation-historical paradigm, but is shaped by its own very different concerns. He elaborates these at some length, and in terms that have become familiar: Old Testament wisdom literature aligns itself firmly to the horizons of creation, and its theology is creation theology.³ It is not without some influence from Israelite thought, but operates

³ Zimmerli 1963:123 says 'Die Weisheit des Alten Testamentes hält sich ganz entschlossen im Horizonte der Schöpfung'. The English version (Zimmerli 1964:148) says something rather different

within the constraints of belief in a comprehensive order, exemplified by the Egyptian concept of *m3ʿt*. Its purpose, however, is not to serve that belief directly, but to further the human mastery of life, both through apprehension and definition of the world, and through more practical advice about how to behave, based on such observations. Ultimately, although it talks about many other things in its quest for comprehension, including nature and the created world, wisdom literature is all about how humans should live, and everything else is subordinated to that purpose.

Zimmerli puts the problem well, although he offers nothing very new either in his account of wisdom's distinctiveness, or in his explanation of that distinctiveness. What makes this such an interesting essay is that he then proceeds, however, neither to reject the wisdom literature on the grounds that it is different, nor to downplay its difference. The mastery of the world that he has identified as central becomes instead the way in which wisdom literature must be joined to the rest of the biblical tradition, and Zimmerli points to the J account of creation as the place where such human mastery is permitted and legitimized. There God not only gives life and freedom to humans, but also shows them his creations, and permits them to name the animals, so that they themselves apprehend and impose order upon a part of creation. What Israelite wisdom does, therefore, is in response to a divine command, even if its own admonitions are less authoritative than the injunctions of biblical law, and this leads to a curious inner tension, between, on the one hand, a confidence that the wise know how to act and what will happen, which is gained from such authorization and from attunement to order in the world, and, on the other, a knowledge that reality is always subordinate to God's will, which is derived from wisdom's consciousness of creation. On this understanding, wisdom ideas find a place in the biblical narrative that is at once both more fundamental and less authoritative than that occupied by ideas of history and covenant: it is a place all the same, and Zimmerli's achievement, beside establishing a characterization of wisdom thought as creation theology that has persisted to this day, is to offer a type of reconciliation that involves no significant movement away from the common interpretations either of historical or of wisdom literature.

again, which has been widely quoted: 'Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation'.

The second part of the essay, on the limit or boundary of wisdom is disappointing in comparison. Briefly, Zimmerli sets against the development of an increasingly confident and dogmatic wisdom, which he sees manifested in Proverbs 1–9, the portrayal in Ecclesiastes of a world that is more fixed and impervious to human apprehension. Qohelet serves as a sort of border guard, who prevents wisdom from going so far as to set constraints on the freedom of God. Faced with the impossibility of mastering a world that cannot be grasped, he demands that humans settle for those things – the ‘portion’ – that God grants them freely, and do not try to comprehend divine action within their own plans. Zimmerli’s own conclusion, however, imposes a different type of limitation, and in a final paragraph marked more by gravity than by clarity – at times, it is close to meaningless in the English version – he suggests both that the creation theology of wisdom needs to expose itself to faith in a creator God who has freely committed himself, and that wisdom will find fulfilment only by grasping the ‘portion’ of God’s historical encounter with Israel. Wisdom has a place in biblical thought, therefore, but should really surrender itself to the narrative of salvation history (and, judging by the terms he uses, also to the broader principles of Lutheran theology).

The intellectual landscape of biblical theology has been transformed in the half-century since this essay was published; even within a decade, indeed, the centrality of salvation history had come under sustained attack, and there were calls for wisdom to be given a more prominent position in biblical theology – albeit calls based on a perception of wisdom’s humanism that owed much to Zimmerli and von Rad. Whilst the salvation-historical model sits licking its wounds today, wisdom literature is certainly out of the kitchen, and although it is difficult to say how far the rush of studies on that literature over the last twenty years merely reflects a wider phenomenon in publishing, it would also be difficult to deny that wisdom is now wearing her party dress. Much of the recent scholarship on wisdom, however, has been concerned to build its own bridges and to recover some important understandings that had become displaced or underplayed: far from being embodiments of some foreign ideology, merely seeking a place in Jewish thought, the wisdom texts are now quite commonly portrayed as intrinsically Jewish themselves, steeped in the language and ideas of other biblical literature. In a climate that accepts or even welcomes theological diversity, there is no longer any significant pressure to align those texts with some unitary concept of biblical theology. Attempts to re-incorporate them, however, bring a new, and arguably more urgent pressure to deal with the sort of problems that Zimmerli discussed, and they give continuing

relevance to his work. To put the problem in a nutshell, the closer we make the relationships between wisdom and historical literature, the harder it becomes to explain what seem to be their fundamental differences in outlook and belief. If Proverbs actually had set its watch by *Amenemope*, then its lack of interest in covenant is not really surprising, merely inconvenient for the biblical theologian; if, on the other hand, it looked to Deuteronomy, then that absence looks more like a deliberate and calculated rejection.⁴ There is a tension between the resemblances and the differences to be found amongst our texts, and the more that we stress the resemblances, the greater that tension becomes.

This problem can become obscured if we deal too loosely with the concepts involved, and Zimmerli's perception of the difficulties has sometimes been attacked on questionable grounds. In his own revisiting of this article, for example, Jamie Grant tried to argue that covenant may not be the centre of attention, but that 'the concept of covenant subtly influences the didactic thrust of the Wisdom books' (Grant 2003:109). His key examples are Job, who 'believes in a Covenant God who has bound himself to relationship in a particular way' and Qohelet, whose disappointed expectation of order and justice in the world arises out of the 'history of Israel's dealings with Yahweh' (Grant 2003:109). I am not sure myself that either claim is true, but even if we allow them, Grant is simply sticking the label 'covenant' on to themes that are widely acknowledged to be important to the wisdom writers: God's relationship with individuals, and divine justice. He is not the first to do so, and in one of the earliest studies to engage with Zimmerli, David Hubbard declared that, '[T]here is a sense in

⁴ It is principally the absence of key Deuteronomic ideas in Proverbs, in fact, that leads David Carr to propose that Deuteronomy is the later work: 'I suggest that it is easier to see how one might move from the general parental teaching seen in Proverbs to heightened claims for a more ancient divine wisdom in Deuteronomy than it is to explain why someone would move from the divinely-revealed wisdom of Deuteronomy to the parental wisdom of Proverbs. ... The authors of the passages in Deuteronomy, authors who were schooled in and had memorized passages ... reappropriated their language to make heightened claims for the Deuteronomic "Torah," a teaching now claimed to be yet older (Mosaic) and more divine than the "teaching" of the father and mother celebrated in traditional wisdom literature ...' (Carr 2011:419). Although I think he is wrong, and that his approach rests on a reductionist reading of Proverbs 1–9, this is not the place in which to engage properly with Carr's ideas. If any or all of Proverbs is indeed earlier than Deuteronomy, a possibility which cannot be denied in principle, then the problem shifts to the continued transmission of the book, and subsequent interpretation of it in ways that are clearly non-Deuteronomic (on which see Weeks 2007:158-69).

which all biblical literature is covenant literature, because it is the literature of the covenant people' (Hubbard 1966: 16, italics original). Of course, if all biblical themes have to be rooted in biblical ideas of covenant, then we may struggle both to explain the importance of some in the literature of other countries, and to find any real meaning in the term 'covenant', but Grant is anyway missing the point. What Zimmerli actually observes – quite rightly – is that biblical wisdom literature seems to find no place for the particular idea of covenant that we commonly associate with Deuteronomy and related materials: a covenant between YHWH and a whole nation, that is not simply presumed in relationships, but formally drawn up and accepted. As it happens, the wisdom literature shows no particular interest in other types of covenant either, but if we did discover some previously overlooked reference to priestly covenants, say, or to the covenant with Noah, it would not change the point that biblical wisdom writers neither appeal directly to the Deuteronomistic covenant as a motive for behaviour, nor apparently take account of that covenant in their expectation of outcomes. Grant may be on firmer ground when he goes on to pick up Michael Fox's point about the importance of 'justice' and 'righteousness' for Qohelet and of other terms linked to covenant in Proverbs (Grant 2003: 109–110), but if we are indeed dealing here with the vocabulary of covenant without any explicit concept of covenant, then those words merely exemplify the problem at hand.

We must be no less careful when it comes to the question of history. I have argued elsewhere myself that Proverbs 1–9 draws on ideas about 'foreign women' that it may have derived from historiographical texts, or at least from contemporary debates linked to such texts (Weeks 2007:135–41), while Jennie Barbour has more recently made a case for Ecclesiastes to have been shaped around subtle references to key figures and events in the history of Israel.⁵ If neither of those examples is deemed persuasive, then we can always point to the superscriptions in Proverbs, and the contexts which they imply, as evidence that the wisdom books are not wholly devoid of historical references (see, e.g., Schultz 1997: 300). Nobody, so far as I am aware, claims that they are. What they do lack, however, and Zimmerli is again surely right about this, is any clear interest in using Israelite history to understand God or the world, let alone any concern with a Deuteronomistic analysis of the past. The fate of

⁵ Barbour 2012. Particular passages, of course, have frequently been interpreted as historical references, and an earlier, rather different attempt to see the whole book in these terms was made in Kaiser 1823.

individuals is never understood against the backdrop of divine action to assist or to punish Israel as a whole in wisdom literature, while people, indeed, are not considered collectively as ‘the people’. Once more, although there may be evidence to suggest an awareness of the historical books amongst the wisdom writers, this does not translate into any apparent incorporation of the ideas that underpin those books.

If we simply extend the sense of ideas like covenant and history, then it becomes easy to find them in wisdom literature, but difficult to attach any significance to the discovery – and that is a problem, of course, that has plagued the discussion of those ideas in other contexts.

Indeed, what made their absence in wisdom seem so remarkable to Zimmerli and others was in part the fact that they had already been extended to most other biblical literature, whether or not that literature showed an explicit concern with them: it was to be another six years before Lothar Perlitt’s work compelled any widespread re-evaluation of the Deuteronomic covenant’s antiquity and centrality (Perlitt 1969). That is an issue which we shall touch on later; the important point for the moment is that, although the absence of such national and covenantal ideas might be less astonishing to us now, it is a real absence all the same.

Zimmerli is right to pinpoint its significance, and we should not obscure it by trying to dilute the concepts or to read more than is there into wisdom literature’s sparse historical references.

This is not, then, an area in which more recent research must lead us to discard Zimmerli’s observations, despite the criticisms sometimes levelled at them. His corresponding description of wisdom theology as a creation theology, on the other hand, seems deeply problematic even though it accords with many more modern claims to the same effect. For Zimmerli, there are two key aspects to this description. Firstly, wisdom embraces a concept of world order, characterized in terms of the Egyptian *m3ʿt*, and secondly it is concerned with human apprehension and mastery of the world. That the latter should relate to creation is important for his argument: it gives him his link to Genesis and to the divine commissioning of humans. However, it is far from clear that anything Zimmerli says about wisdom gives it an intrinsic connection to creation, as such. In Egypt, *m3ʿt* is linked to the basic and pervasive order or equilibrium which enables there to be a world instead of chaos: the establishment of *m3ʿt* is necessarily, therefore, an aspect of creation, but *m3ʿt* is not itself creative, and the focus of Egyptian thought is upon the maintenance of *m3ʿt*. It is highly improbable, for many reasons, that Jewish wisdom literature inherited *m3ʿt* from Egypt; if it did, however, it was not

inheriting some sort of creation theology, and it is problematic even to describe the concept as theological. The arguments for any other idea of world-order in the wisdom literature are extremely speculative, but they are usually set in terms of laws or mechanisms built into the world (Weeks 2010: 112-13), which are extremely difficult to reconcile with statements in Proverbs about divine control, let alone with the ideas presented in Job and Ecclesiastes. As for human mastery of the world, this refers to little more than wisdom's concern with the human ability to survive and prosper. To be sure, Zimmerli picks up Albrecht Alt's idea (Alt 1951, 1976), linking onomastica to the account of Solomon's wisdom in 2 Kgs 5.13 (ET 4.33) and to a supposed sort of encyclopaedic nature wisdom, but that idea is itself misguided, and has nothing to do, in any case, with the wisdom literature that we actually possess (Fox 1986; Weeks 1994: 111-13).

The developments that Zimmerli proposes in the second half of his essay are loosely linked to both these ideas of creation and mastery, but involve a profound misreading of the texts. The wisdom that is made so prominent in Proverbs 1-9 may be personified, but her promises are of understanding and a proper fear of God, not of security and mastery through assimilation of an order within which God must act. Qohelet, in turn, may well emphasize the limits of human understanding, but he too looks to fear of God as the best hope for humans (7.18; 8.12-13), and the fact that what God gives may limit our achievement is an aspect of the more general limitations that he sees in the world, not a key to his theology, or something redemptive within that world. Although it has been picked up by many other writers who see 'pessimistic' wisdom reacting to constrain 'optimistic' wisdom, what Zimmerli presents, in fact, is not a real debate between wisdom writers, but a thinly disguised confrontation between a justification by works, in which we can save ourselves by acting in accordance with world order, and a justification by faith, in which God reaches out freely with his gift, and we, powerless to achieve security in any other way, must respond.

Going beyond what Zimmerli himself asserts, though, it can hardly be denied that biblical wisdom literature has a strong interest in God as creator of the world, and I have suggested elsewhere that we can reasonably speak of a 'creator' theology in these texts (Weeks 2010: 119). The depiction of God as creator allowed the writers to treat him as a single, universal deity, which no doubt facilitated discussion of the issues that concerned them, and it also enabled them to present the sort of distinctions between God and humanity that are important in all the wisdom books, but perhaps especially in Job: his role as creator affirms God's

power, superiority, and freedom to do what he will with what is his. This interest in God as creator, however, does not self-evidently translate into any consistent wisdom concern with creation, which is evoked to prove various points about God or wisdom, but not as a direct concern in itself. If we loosen the concept of ‘creation’ enough to make ‘creation theology’ refer to any theological concern with the natural, non-human world, then we can apply it to some sections within the wisdom literature, but it hardly characterizes that literature as a whole. A further extension to include the human world would draw in most of the other biblical literature, unless we chose arbitrarily to exclude concerns with history or the cult, because, despite many assertions to the contrary, wisdom literature is not inherently more human-centered than that other literature. However much we shuffle the categories, it is difficult to define thematically any sort of wisdom ‘creation theology.’

The real point of Zimmerli’s argument, however, is that wisdom literature has an alternative to salvation history, which represents a quite different way of thinking about everything. At the time when he was writing, it was widely supposed that the wisdom literature arose within a professional class, which was distinct from the circles that produced other biblical literature, and more attuned to foreign than to Jewish ideas – an assumption that made it easy to imbue the writers with a quite different worldview. That understanding has not entirely disappeared, but the general movement in biblical studies has been away from such compartmentalization of the culture, and towards an understanding of all biblical texts as products of a single scribal class, comparable to the scribal classes of Egypt or Mesopotamia. That does not prevent us from recognizing diversity, but it does help us to understand the many things that our texts have in common, without being forced to posit a myriad of cross-influences between distinct and rival groups. Correspondingly, however, it becomes much more difficult to speak of completely separate worldviews co-existing within such a class. Zimmerli’s characterization of the wisdom writers endows them not merely with distinctive interests or ideas, but potentially with a quite different understanding of causation, for instance. Such cultural and intellectual fragmentation within the literate class of a small country or province should not be presumed lightly, and when we look at, say, the many expressions and ideas held in common by Proverbs 1–9 and Deuteronomy,⁶ it seems all the

⁶ See, for instance, Robert 1934-5; Buchanan 1965; Maier 1995: 72-9 (but also Weeks 2007: 103-104 on the idea expressed by these writers, that Proverbs is in some way deliberately interpreting Deuteronomy).

more difficult to believe that their writers could share so much and yet see the world in irreconcilably different ways. If only for that reason, then any appeal to a distinctive wisdom worldview should not be our first resort when we try to understand the reluctance of wisdom literature to engage with historical or covenantal ideas, and Zimmerli's attempt indicates some of the practical difficulties that may be involved if we do choose to go down that route.

Having said that, however, we probably do need to address the problem at the level of ideas, even if we do not try to base those ideas in some distinctive worldview: this is not simply a literary, generic issue. Not all differences between texts are ideological in character, of course, and we can easily imagine that a modern writer of economics textbooks, say, could also write love poetry without a word in it about money. It is tempting to say, in the same vein, that the distinctive features of wisdom literature arise not from the beliefs of the authors, but from the genre and subject-matter of the wisdom books, and that had those authors been writing histories, they would have expressed the ideas that we find lacking. Our economist, however, can avoid mentioning money in his love poems because money (we may hope) is not central to his experience or expression of love. When a wisdom writer places divine-human relations or the human quest for survival at the heart of his concerns, but then says nothing at all about the historical or collective aspects of such concerns, that absence is surely not just a consequence of his subject-matter, but also of his ideas: it would matter that the fate of individuals might be determined by the behaviour of the nation as a whole, and would surely influence or constrain his expression of those ideas. Genre should not be ignored when we are dealing with any text, but, again, it does not really provide an adequate explanation. Even instructional literature, with its highly conventional father-son setting, is sometimes used as a vehicle for historical and political ideas in Egypt,⁷ and when that genre can be adapted, indeed, to create a strongly salvation-historical instruction by the writer of Psalm 78, then it does not seem reasonable to claim that the writers in Proverbs felt any less free to introduce historical ideas, even if they were not aiming to write a history.

In short, then, Zimmerli was right to point out that biblical wisdom literature does not engage with the historical and covenantal ideas dominant in much other biblical literature, and this lack of engagement seems all the more marked as subsequent scholarship tends increasingly to emphasize the continuity in other respects between wisdom and the other books. Zimmerli

⁷ The instructions of *Merikare* and *Amenemhet* are the most notable examples.

does not make a strong case for the wisdom writers having possessed some fundamentally different worldview, however, and such a strong disconnection would in any case sit uneasily both with our perceptions of continuity and with the ways in which we tend now to think about the scribal culture from which all the biblical literature emerged. We cannot just dispose of the problem in that way, therefore, any more than we can put the distinctiveness of wisdom literature in this respect solely down to issues of subject-matter and genre. So what is left?

I think that there are, in fact, three principal factors at work, each of which involves the rejection of covenantal and salvation-historical ideas for a different reason. The first of these is that, although they are probably all Jewish in origin, the biblical wisdom books tend to present themselves as universal, and so to play down those aspects of their content which are specifically Jewish. The second is that the wisdom writers recognized a fundamental incompatibility between Deuteronomic thought and their own strong concern to maintain the freedom of God, which led them to reject key aspects of that thought. The third, and last, is that scholars have not merely tended to overstate the centrality of historical and covenantal ideas – a tendency that is now generally acknowledged – but that they have tended too often to treat the constitutive elements of such ideas as a single phenomenon, with the presence or absence of any single element implying the presence or absence of the rest. This inclination has exaggerated the gulf between some of the wisdom literature and other texts by suggesting that they cannot share anything in common unless they share, in effect, everything in common. Of course, these three factors do not all have the same role to play in each of the biblical wisdom books, and they are not wholly separable, but I shall try to deal with them individually.

I should not want to put too much emphasis on the first, although it is the simplest in some ways. What makes the wisdom books appear so universal is in large part their lack of specific references to history and nation, and so to evoke that universalism as a reason for the absence is to risk begging the question. It is difficult to ignore the fact, however, that Ecclesiastes in particular contains little that is specifically Jewish, to the extent that even when Qohelet apparently evokes Deuteronomy in chapter 5, it is to make a point about the breaking of oaths that would have been comprehensible to any ancient reader – indeed, oath-breaking may have been one of the few offences that everyone in the hellenistic period would have believed to provoke divine anger (see, e.g., Liebeschuetz 1979: 40–42; Mikalson 1983: 31–38). The book

does not claim to be anything other than Jewish, but a non-Jew would have found in it nothing incomprehensible or inapplicable to their own lives.⁸ Qohelet makes considerable use of anecdotes, furthermore, but in none of these do we find a name or place and even Qohelet's God is never called 'Yahweh'.

In Job, on the other hand, the narrator shows no similar reluctance to use the divine name, and Jewish readers would surely have recognized many links with Jewish literature. The story is set abroad, however, possibly in the distant past, and that fiction is generally maintained: outside the narrative sections and introductions, 'Yahweh' only appears twice (12.9; 28.28), with the characters showing a preference in their speeches for epithets like 'Shaddai' or 'Eloah', which may have been regarded as archaic or less specifically Jewish (cf. Exod. 6.3). We do not know whether the author was constrained to adopt this setting by existing stories about Job, but he has not obviously introduced any elements that make the work relevant to Jewish readers in particular, and even Job's piety is described in ways that any ancient reader might have recognized. The foreignness of the setting may not have been introduced solely, then, to enhance its universality, but it contributes to the sense that this story could have happened in any country. Proverbs presents a more difficult case, not least because it incorporates so many different materials, and although some of these are most probably supposed to be foreign, or are offered without specification as 'words of the wise' (22.17; 24.23), by no means all of Proverbs is so universal as Ecclesiastes, or so deliberately non-Jewish as Job. Indeed, the book includes allusions to Jewish practices, such as the offering of first fruits (cf. 3.9), many uses of the divine name, and some unambiguous references to the Jewish Law (e.g., 28.7, 9). Clearly, a desire to appear universal does not influence all of the wisdom materials to the same extent, but it must not be neglected as a factor that may have shaped decisions about the subject-matter, and it is probably not unrelated either to the universalistic presentation of God in the books, or to an awareness of foreign materials addressing the same issues.

The second factor, divine freedom, is more complicated, and has to be considered in the context of some broader issues. I have already touched on the issue of creation theology in

⁸ It has, of course, been suggested more than once that Ecclesiastes is a translation, potentially of a non-Jewish work, but that view has never enjoyed wide support, and is difficult to sustain (Weeks 2012: 13–14). The fact that it is written in Hebrew, however, may be the most specifically Jewish thing about it.

connection with Zimmerli's claims, and expressed my own doubts about the significance of creation as a theme. It is not uncommon, however, for scholars to speak of a creation theology in wisdom literature that is defined not by theme so much as by method or epistemology. James Barr, in fact, talks of a 'natural theology' (1999: 476–78) and the wisdom writers are sometimes credited with an 'empirical' approach (see Weeks 2010: 114–16): although it is often just asserted more generally that the ideas of wisdom literature are derived from human experience and observation of the world, the influence of later theological and philosophical categories is apparent in many attempts to deal with a literature that claims authority without direct appeal to revelation. It is surely impossible, however, to sustain such claims for Job and Ecclesiastes. The former revolves around the characters' ignorance of the real situation in which they find themselves, and stresses the inability of humans to comprehend God. The latter has Qohelet act as an empiricist at the beginning of his account, but his attempts to find meaning or profit in human life through experimentation are unsuccessful, and he goes on to express grave concerns about the false conclusions drawn by humans from their observation of a world that misleads them: indeed, that is arguably a major theme of the book, and Qohelet's own conclusions flow from reflection upon such entirely dogmatic positions as the reality of divine judgment and the finality of death (Weeks 2012: 104–131).

Again, we have to deal with many different materials in Proverbs, most of which offer little information about the basis of their ideas. Chapters 1–9, though, are explicitly concerned with the need to acquire wisdom through instruction, in order to make proper choices in the world: discernment is a consequence of teaching, not of personal experience, and the father who offers the instruction in these chapters does not claim to be passing on his own experience of the world – indeed, he speaks in chapter 4 of the teaching that he received from his father, and calls repeatedly on his fictive son not to observe or to imitate, but to accept such teaching. Indeed, it is probably the most important theme in Proverbs 1–9 that to rely on one's own, uneducated experience is to court lethal danger, because without prior instruction, we cannot distinguish what is safe from what is lethal (Aletti 1977; Weeks 2007). It is interesting to compare the much earlier instruction of *Ptahhotep*, where the father describes what he is teaching to his son as a body of knowledge transmitted down the centuries, but

taught originally to humans by the gods.⁹ Although ancient advice literature may contain admonitions explicitly rooted in the experience of individuals, it does not generally understand itself in those terms, but as a heritage that is to be passed on from each generation to the next, and learned as a preparation for life. When the writer of Proverbs 24.30-34 tells us, therefore, that he received instruction from considering the overgrown field of the sluggard, we should not extrapolate from this parable some more general wisdom epistemology, or even an epistemology for Proverbs. Just as Qohelet maintains that the wicked will die and the God-fearing do well, despite the evidence of his own eyes (Eccl 8.10-14), so the sentence literature of Proverbs is filled with wholly aspirational claims (e.g. 10.24-25), and even with statements about divine likes and dislikes that cannot possibly be rooted in human observation (e.g. 11.1).

It is important to understand, then, that despite its willingness to question beliefs and to embrace uncertainty, the difference between wisdom literature and literature that appeals explicitly to revelation is not that wisdom claims an alternative, human source of knowledge, but that it simply does not seek the authority of revelation for its assertions. Biblical literature does not work with a dichotomy between ‘revealed’ and ‘natural’ knowledge, so that, whatever it may imply to us, the absence of one does not require, for the wisdom writers, the presence of the other. To the extent that they seek to validate their contents at all, wisdom texts tend to do so by their claim to be the words of wise and successful men, and, as Roland Murphy has observed in another context, if we ask what was the basis of their wisdom, then we are asking a question that they never asked themselves (Murphy 1978: 41; cf. 1996: 116). That does not mean, however, that the writers were any less attached to their dogmatic positions, and we should probably understand, say, their shared perception of God as creator neither as an item of faith nor as a philosophical conclusion, open to debate, but as a fixed point in their thinking: they would no more doubt it than I would doubt the laws of

⁹ In the prologue to *Ptahhotep* on the Middle Kingdom Papyrus Prisse (5,3), the vizier asks the king: ‘Let him [the son] be told the speech of those who listen, the advice of the forebears, those who listened to the gods.’ The reference to the gods is dropped in later New Kingdom versions of the instruction (for translations of which see, conveniently, Hagen 2012: 252–58), in favour of a reference to earlier viziers, but in all versions the king then talks of the *mdt hr-hꜣt*, ‘the speech of the past’ (Prisse 5,5), while the need to transmit the instruction across the generations is a key theme of the epilogue.

thermodynamics, for the validity of which I rely wholly on the assertions of others, but belief in which I would not class alongside belief in ghosts or fairies.

It does seem clear that for some or all of the wisdom writers (and probably for many of their contemporaries also), the freedom of God to act without human constraint was just such a fixed point, associated with the absolute power attributed to God in wisdom literature. There are, of course, many sayings in Proverbs that predict divine favour or disfavour, and Prov. 19.17 even speaks of charity as, metaphorically, a loan made to God that he will repay. Alongside these, however, sit other sayings that emphasize the ultimate power of God over human affairs, and, especially in the more discursive Proverbs 1–9, it is clear that humans are expected not simply to behave in specific ways so that God will interfere on their behalf, but to align themselves to an understanding of the divine will that will enable them to make the right choices for themselves. Correspondingly, of course, there are no shades of grey in Proverbs, and one does not become just righteous enough to get rewarded, or moderately wise: humans are not haggling with God. In Ecclesiastes, furthermore, where behaviour is more of a balancing act, human lives are entirely subsumed within much greater schemes, and consequently unpredictable: the best one can do is to fear God and to trust that things will turn out well, if not necessarily in the way that one wants. If these books are cautious about any simple equation between human behaviour and divine response, however, it is Job that tackles the issue most explicitly, from the moment that the Satan's challenge asks whether it is enough to be righteous solely in the expectation of reward, through to the divine speeches, when God rejects any idea that he might be bound by human expectations.

It is also in Job that we find a curious statement, often disregarded, that brings into focus the attitudes of wisdom literature in this area. In chapters 40–41, God is talking about Leviathan, and asks a series of rhetorical questions to make the point that humans cannot capture this creature, tame it, sell it or harm it. Part of this asks:

Would you put a reed through his nose and pierce his cheek with a ring?

Is he going to ask you many favours or flatter you with humility?

Will he cut a covenant with you, for you to take him into service forever?

Are you going to have fun with him like a bird, and put him on a leash for your girls?

Will dealers haggle over him? Sell shares in him to merchants?

(40.26-29; ET 41.2-5).

The sequence as a whole is reminiscent of the questions thrown at Job when God first addresses him, and it becomes clear, in fact, that Leviathan is a surrogate for God himself here, when God subsequently demands to know how, if humans cannot challenge even this created beast, they can hope to stand against its creator, and how he himself could possibly be put in anybody's debt, since everything under heaven belongs to him anyway (41.2-3; ET 41.10-11). The topic is not really the strength of Leviathan, therefore, but the strength of God, and the impossibility that humans might constrain him by force or by obligation. This makes the reference to covenant and servitude rather striking, especially since it steps beyond the wild animal imagery – it is hard to imagine Leviathan himself signing a contract – and it is tempting to suppose that there is a conscious swipe at covenantal ideas here. Even without the explicit reference, however, it is difficult to imagine the God who makes these declarations in Job placing himself deliberately in a relationship with humans that commits him to reward them if they have met certain conditions – and this is a God, we should recall, who has felt no compunction about the destruction of his servant Job. If the writer of Job believed this to be the nature of God, he is unlikely to have found the covenantal ideas in Deuteronomy even remotely plausible, let alone acceptable. The same is surely true in Ecclesiastes, despite its more impersonal portrayal of God, and there are many statements in Proverbs that sit uncomfortably with the Deuteronomic presentation.

Proverbs does not offer the clearest demonstrations of the two factors that I have discussed so far: it is the least universal of the wisdom books in its presentation, and it talks about the power of God without offering a consistent and coherent portrayal of God. It is with respect to Proverbs, however, and especially chapters 1–9, that we can most readily discuss the third factor, the way in which we tend to consolidate ideas of Law, history and covenant, because it is here that we find the strongest engagement with Deuteronomic ideas in biblical wisdom literature. I have touched already on the significance of instruction for Proverbs 1–9: it is a prerequisite to wisdom and to an understanding of the divine will. As has often been observed, however, the language associated with instruction in these chapters is strongly reminiscent of Deuteronomic language for the Jewish Law, and there are reasonable grounds to suppose that Proverbs 1–9 sees the Law as a route, *via* wisdom, for individuals to acquire a knowledge of the choices that they should make, even in situations that are not explicitly addressed by the Law. The Law becomes, we might say, a personal, and individually transformative insight into God's will. If that is indeed the case in Proverbs, then we are dealing with something close to what is elsewhere usually characterized as 'Torah piety'.

I do not want to get involved here with the many potential questions about relative dating, or the extent to which Deuteronomy's own use of instructional language contributes to its relationship with Proverbs. Proverbs 1–9 is not the only biblical text in which we find such a conception of the Law, expressed without reference to any explicit idea of a national covenant, and so the idea that wisdom literature might draw on such a presentation does not depend solely on the way in which we interpret Proverbs 1–9 and its allusions (cf. Levenson 1987: 564). Indeed, although we find references to an internalized, personal possession of Torah in some texts which are closely related to the biblical wisdom books, such as Psalm 37, it is probably not an idea that is to be regarded as exclusive to wisdom literature, and Psalm 40, for example, would not generally be classified as wisdom. Obviously, the idea is most prominent in the so-called Torah Psalms, and Kent Reynolds has recently explored it at some length in the context of Psalm 119, suggesting that the psalmist draws on wisdom locutions, but deliberately avoids any specific alignment between wisdom and Law (Reynolds 2010). It would probably be a mistake, therefore, to see 'Torah piety' as a development rooted entirely within wisdom literature, and it may have been no less influenced by Deuteronomy's own presentation of Law as something to be learned by the individual. It is an idea, though, that sits very comfortably with the paradigms and language of advice literature.

Job and Ecclesiastes do not embrace this approach, although the epilogue to the latter does commend keeping divine commandments.¹⁰ There are some possible echoes of Proverbs 1–9 in Job, however (Weeks 2007: 156), and it seems likely that, when both books were written, the Law could already be understood in a way that essentially disconnected it from ideas about a national covenant. That is not, perhaps, surprising, since the Deuteronomistic portrayal of that covenant was surely read in the post-exilic period as a record of failure, and the very concept of a 'people' needed re-alignment in an era when there was no longer a Jewish state. Accordingly, as post-exilic works (at least in the forms that we have them) the biblical wisdom books probably never stood out against some monochromatic background of covenantal and salvation-historical ideas. In their concern both with individual piety and with a universal deity, they were arguably, in fact, more relevant to the circumstances of a

¹⁰ That passage (12.13–14) itself raises some interesting questions about the extent to which the Qohelet of the monologue might have accepted such ideas as the need to fear and obey God, without having a place in his thought for the broader notion of a revealed Torah with which Deuteronomy associates them; see Weeks 2013.

scattered Judaism than Deuteronomy and its covenant could possibly have been, but the key points in this context are that the lack of covenantal and salvation-historical themes in the wisdom books is really not surprising in this period, and that some wisdom literature does seem to have engaged, or perhaps even stimulated, attempts to understand the Law in a very different way.

Taking all three factors together, I do not think that the distinctiveness which Zimmerli identified demands the sort of explanation that he offers. Wisdom literature is certainly different in some important respects from the historical and prophetic literature that has been so central to many modern readings of the Bible, not least because it operates with an idea of God that places a strong emphasis upon his universality and freedom from human constraint. It does not operate, however, with a view of the world or of divine action that is fundamentally different: mostly, it just thinks bigger, and it avoids historical or covenantal issues partly as a consequence of its own concerns, but partly because it may not have found everything that it wished to address so closely integrated with those issues as scholars have sometimes been inclined to suppose.

I want to finish very briefly, however, not by emphasizing the obvious point that certain biblical perspectives were given too much priority by scholars of a previous generation, nor by pointing out the less widely acknowledged fact that different theological ideas can co-exist without anyone much noticing – and it would be intriguing to see the old methods of biblical theology applied to the average hymnbook. The most interesting question that arises for me from Zimmerli's work is, rather, why it is the wisdom literature and not the Deuteronomic literature that seems to have to find or justify its place. The wisdom books are undoubtedly difficult and idiosyncratic, to the point of being enigmatic at times, but to theologians they offer a direct engagement with significant theological and moral issues, some of which can be traced back in related foreign texts to the earliest human literature that we possess, and they do so using a universalistic and functionally monotheistic type of discourse that makes it straightforward to consider them alongside more modern theologies. When theologians engage with wisdom literature, they are not left pondering the unspoken motives of characters in narrative, trying to extrapolate universal insights from the activities of an ancient national deity on behalf of or against his tiny ancient nation, or reading between the lines of texts that have more interest in centralizing sacrifice than in personal piety or the problem of evil.

For the historian, on the other hand, biblical wisdom literature is the Jewish reflex of something very ancient, even if it is difficult for us to say whether the texts that we possess are merely late products of a longer tradition in Israel, or whether this type of composition only actually began quite late amongst Jewish writers. More significantly, perhaps, wisdom paradigms were to go on to become an important way of reading many earlier texts – offering, as Gerald Sheppard puts it, a ‘hermeneutical construct’ (Sheppard 1980) – and they provide a vehicle even for apocalyptic ideas in literature at Qumran. Proverbs, as we have seen, is implicated in the development of ideas about Law which might be considered foundational for rabbinic Judaism, and ben Sira, under the influence of Proverbs, was later to go even further by integrating ideas of election as well as Law into a framework that universalized both wisdom and God, an achievement that represents not the confluence of traditions, so much as the total re-interpretation of one by another. Deuteronomic and Deuteronomic thought can claim a certain antiquity itself, to the extent that it embodies ideas that were doubtless common to many national religions, and it would be hard to overstate its impact on much of the biblical literature beyond Deuteronomy. Its lasting influence is much less apparent, however, except insofar as it is mediated and transformed through other ideas. In the end, biblical traditions should not be in competition, and biblical theology should not have to crown a queen. Should a prince ever come calling for his bride, however, wisdom surely has no less right to try the slipper.

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